‘When the reservoir comes’: Drowned Villages, Community and Nostalgia in Contemporary British Fiction

A ‘drowned’ or flooded village describes the destruction of a settlement or community to make way for a reservoir. As a practice, it most commonly occurred in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the need for fresh water in growing industrial cities was at its height. This article will explore three representations of the ‘drowned village’ in contemporary British fiction. Reginald Hill’s *On Beulah Height* (1992), Hilary Mantel’s short story ‘The Clean Slate’ (2001) and Sarah Hall’s *Haweswater* (2002) will be considered in terms of how the drowned village is presented and described, and what this representation suggests about the ways nostalgia, ritual and ruin impact upon notions of community and place. Drawing upon the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, the article will explore the drowned village as one expression of the continuing desire for community within contemporary British fiction and culture. With recent discussions of ‘inoperative’ community as backdrop (Schoene), it combines Nancy’s suspicion of the ‘lost community’ with imagery of loss, melancholy and nostalgia embodied by the drowned village to articulate how grief is unifying too. Informed also by Marc Augé’s work, the following discussion will explore the drowned village as a ‘non-place’ upon which several contemporary British authors are inscribing questions about pain and suffering as more ‘situating’ of community than the traditional hallmarks of identity.

The drowned village offers a metaphor for nostalgic community and longing *par excellence*. Jean-Luc Nancy has written of such modern day fetish for the unity of a ‘lost’ age:

> The lost, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman republic, the first Christian community […] always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy. (9)

Although the title of *Haweswater* is taken from the name of the reservoir itself, implying a sense of inevitability from the beginning of the novel, the sense of ‘woven’ and ‘infrangible’ bonding is certainly characteristic of the villagers’ relation to Mardale in Hall’s novel. Hill’s *On Beulah Height* and Mantel’s ‘The Clean Slate’ (from her 2003 collection *Learning to Talk*) both take a more sceptical approach to the ‘immanent unity’ paradigm rendered so cautiously by Nancy in ‘The Inoperative

Community’. Hill’s novel, in particular, appears keen to undermine the pastoral stereotype of wholesome and altruistic connectedness: ‘“Closed places, closed minds, eh?”’ remarks a detective constable (Hill 183) involved in the investigation of child abduction.

Coupled with this link to community as by definition ‘inoperative’, the drowned village in these examples from British fiction also articulates the paradoxes of contemporary nostalgia. Such contradictions are highlighted in the work of Svetlana Boym:

> The word nostalgia comes from two Greek roots, *nostos* meaning ‘return home’ and *algia* ‘longing’. I would define it as a home that no longer exists or has never existed. (Boym 7)

A village destroyed to make way for a reservoir oscillates forever between these two states. It no longer exists in the form that it did, irrevocably transformed by the process, with the ‘village’ of drowned village put under great strain, as it is now uninhabitable. For the purposes of this essay, uninhabitable places are described as ‘non-places’ (Augé) although this thinking of fraught spatiality is also indebted to the work of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot. In a wider sense, each of the texts examined in this essay inscribe both aspects of the Greek roots to the word nostalgia, the return home — or even the return of the home — is a key aspect of the narratives of both *On Beulah Height* and *Haweswater*.

For example, in Hill’s novel, the return of the village of Dendale from the depths of the reservoir (oddly never named, in stark contrast to the titular position of the historically real Haweswater) allows in many ways the detectives to make progress and crack their case. In *Haweswater*, on the other hand, Janet Lightburn’s desire to return the village to its ‘original’ state is the dramatic and emotional pinnacle of the book. The state of longing and grief is written through these texts in several ways and via the experiences of a range of characters, including through the metaphorical and literal loss of children. Mantel’s short story, transversely, is more elliptical in its representation of such desire for what is lost. The return home and the power of longing are both motivators, yet the belief in resolution or climax that carries the narratives of *On Beulah Height* and *Haweswater* remains wholly absent from ‘The

Clean Slate’. At one point the narrator suggests, ‘I had the theory that our family was bent on erasing itself’ (126), which is a sentence that could just as succinctly describe the narrative process of the entire story.

The combination of the lost community paradigm of Nancy and the sense that the drowned village occupies a position of existing while being uninhabitable suggests the pertinence of Jacques Derrida’s thinking through of *khõra*. Derrida revisits this obscure Greek word to describe such place/non-place *frisson* as paradoxically situating everything while in itself possessing nothing (99). *Khõra* is arrived at in Derrida’s work through Plato and comes to represent a space that offers a receptacle for all properties while containing nothing. This state of reception without possession appears apt for reading the sheer volume of intertextual and historical meaning inscribed upon the non-place of the drowned village. For example, in all three texts explored here (a tentative rather than exhaustive selection) several concerns, expressions or references are key aspects of how the representations are both layered and constructed. These include: Christianity, especially via John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), which is explicitly woven into *On Beulah Height* and *Haweswater* more subtly; modernity and its impact upon the city/country relationship and identities; sexuality, death and ritual, those rituals within and without the community;[1] family, memory and mystery, including the reservoir as evoking a mystery genre of its own, thus, the potential for classifying *On Beulah Height* as ‘reservoir noir’. It is popularly considered a generic category, if not yet a critical term, as fan sites indicate.[2] The features are a detective or police procedural form, hence noir, while the reservoir is not merely the setting for the story, but catalyses the narrative as metaphor for mystery and practical hiding place. The intentional ‘drowning’ of a place of habitation is also a requirement. These characteristics of reservoir noir will become clearer through analysis of Hill’s novel in particular.

1 For example, the rituals of the farming community of Mardale in their process for burying the dead, alongside the later, but no less rigid ritual, of preparing a village to be drowned, which transversely involves exhuming the dead.

2 For further details, please see this example of a fan site, ‘Reservoir Noir: Drowned Towns’: http://mysteryreadersinc.blogspot.co.uk/2015/04/reservoir-noir-drowned-towns.html [accessed June 30, 2017]

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The inaccessibility of the space of a demolished and flooded village opens a gateway to the ultimate ‘imagined’ community. It eludes mastery, physical access, only contained and containable by the water — an inhuman, and uninhabitable element for people — which catalyses its imaginary power, the only way in is via thought and therefore meaning can proliferate. Often such possibilities and meanings exist simultaneously, as contraries or contradiction. This dynamism occurs in *Haweswater* via the oppositional sexual relationship of Janet and Jack. It is presented through explicit struggle, described as ‘arriving like a tumour along a piece of body [o]f it and yet deformed, damaging’. ‘The Clean Slate’, however, articulates no such discomfort with ambiguity like ‘jokes that have lost their punchlines […] retorts and witty snubs that have come unfastened from their origins’. It is the *frisson* and vibration of these either/or moments of uncertainty that suggest an underlying neuralgia to these representations of drowned villages. A contrariness hinted at by another French thinker, Maurice Blanchot, in his text *The Writing of the Disaster* that opens with the line: ‘The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact’ (1). This essay will highlight the drowned village as a hermetically sealed space, remaining closed to all investigation and understanding, except via the inherently unstable and contrary process of the imagination.

First under consideration is Hill’s reservoir noir Dalziel and Pascoe novel *On Beulah Height*. It starts with a transcript of an interview with Betsy Allgood that concerns the ‘drowning’ of Dendale, a fictional Yorkshire village. Just prior to the filling of the reservoir, three blonde little girls go missing and a local teenager and loner, Benny Lightfoot, is blamed although he evades police capture and disappears. The villagers relocate to nearby Danby and then the disappearances stop, until fifteen years later another blonde little girl, Lorraine Dacre, vanishes while walking her dog. Dalziel, who also investigated previously, notices the graffiti ‘Benny’s Back’ as he arrives in Danby and several characters report having seen him. Walter Wulfstan, who lost his daughter Mary, has arranged a musical recital and the singer is Elizabeth Wulfstan. Betsy Allgood as was, adopted by the Wulfstans following the suicide of both her parents. Meanwhile, Pascoe’s own daughter Rosie, who is a fan of the local story ‘Nina and the Nix’, reports seeing the nix take Nina on returning from a day out, shortly afterwards she is diagnosed with meningitis and hospitalised.

Subsequently, the very hot weather exposes the remains of Dendale. Shortly afterwards Sergeant Wield discovers Lorraine’s body hidden beneath a dead sheep and divers uncover the skeleton of Benny Lightfoot in an old cellar flooded by the reservoir. At the concert, Elizabeth sings a personal translation of Mahler’s ‘Songs for dead children’ and Dalziel confronts Wulfstan. He confesses that he saw Benny’s ghost in the valley (it was actually his brother, Barney, returned from Australia) and ‘Benny’ led him to ‘Mary’. Wulfstan charged down on Lorraine thinking she was his daughter; the girl ran, fell and broke her neck. Wulfstan also admits torturing Benny in his cellar years ago — mistakenly thinking he took Mary — and then leaving him there to drown. Pascoe challenges Elizabeth saying she could have saved Benny, but chose not to because she knew all along that the killer was her own father, Jack Allgood. He then argues that the songs are her confession and reveal the site where the girls’ bodies are buried, on Beulah Height, a local landmark and hill. Rosie Pascoe makes a full recovery. She saw Wulfstan charge on Lorraine and thought he was the nix taking Nina. The novel ends with the detectives beginning the excavation on Beulah Height.

Dominic Head argues that in *On Chesil Beach* (2007), Ian McEwan ‘uses the idea of the seaside as a liminal space to embed, symbolically, its central idea’ (118). As the text is a novella, he also suggests that short books, like short stories, ‘depend upon a single strong symbolic setting or motif’ (118). These observations are helpful for reading the representation of landscape in *On Beulah Height* in several ways. Firstly, similarly to McEwan’s invocation of the seaside through Chesil Beach, Hill’s novel employs a fictional reservoir informed by geographical fact to create his own liminal space. Despite much of the story taking place in nearby Danby, it is Dendale, its drowned and ghostly twin that offers the site or stage for the narrative. McEwan’s novella utilises a real place, with affective, nostalgic power, in order to symbolically embed his ‘central idea’, which in many respects is miscommunication between people. The central idea in *On Beulah Height*, however, is not as easy to identify, which is perhaps partly due to this liminal space being fictive with a dash of geographical fact. For example, the ominously named ‘Corpse Road’ is also described in detail in *Haweswater*, which is itself mapped onto the geography of the Lake District. *On Beulah Height* often bears a knowing and self-reflective tone and the references to Mahler and Bunyan confirms this self-conscious inflection to the text.

Dendale and the unnamed reservoir it becomes in the novel offer the kind of liminal space Head has identified because it too draws upon collective memory or emotional, rather rational, recognition. It is a non-place, it is uninhabitable, and yet it ‘situates’ characters’ loss and grief. The resurfacing of the drowned village leads to the discovery of the girls’ bodies, but the reservoir itself does not ‘possess’ them. Formally too its position is ambiguous, it is central to the plot while simultaneously residing on the periphery of much of the narrative. Like Chesil Beach, the reservoir becomes a palimpsest for the ideas and intertexts at work throughout the novel, literally revealing what lies beneath the calm surface at a crucial point in the story.

The first of these inscribed ideas is a pseudo-Freudian notion of the return of the repressed because the village of Dendale reappears in an altered state in *On Beulah Height*. Moreover, unlike the return of Mardale in *Haweswater*, Dendale’s ghostly re-emergence unlocks the narrative and also obliquely symbolises sexual secrecy and perversion. This connection furnishes the return with a sense of sexualised ‘repression’ as well as the biblical notion of washing clean, which is never far from the surface of the reservoir metaphor either. Thus, this is the first description of the return of the repressed in Hill’s novel:

> Around the dark waters of the reservoir ran a broad pale fillet of washed rock and baked mud across which ran the lines of ancient walls and on which stood piles of shaped and faced stone showing where bits of drowned village had come gasping up for air again. (Hill 88)

This description also reveals a common thread across all the texts and the discourse of the ‘drowned’ village in general, that is to personify the village. Part of this emotiveness is the use of the word ‘village’ to describe both the place and the community of people who inhabit it. However, more straightforwardly, the ‘drowned village’ expresses the horror of the absolute destruction and loss of a space once lived in because flooded a village is annihilated by becoming uninhabitable. Boym has written of the process of nostalgia as a combining of ‘defamiliarization and sense of distance’ (16), which flooding a once occupied village does to inhabitants and non-inhabitants alike. Yet there is also a feeling of preservation to the creation of this artificial body of water, like embalming the village, so that it will always remain of that time. Frozen in its final moment and kept in a stasis worthy of Miss Havisham, unified in space and time. It is not simply the ‘loss’ of the homeland that stimulates a

nostalgic longing for what can no longer be, or be accessed, or lived, but rather that this new non-place, the reservoir, comes to embody, enact and encapsulate the qualities so desired by the nostalgic. Rather, it is the very impossibility of this homeland that makes it desirable, and nostalgia is made possible only through destruction, a destruction the nostalgic so wishes had been prevented. As Boym suggests, all this analysis implies, and indeed implicates, the figure of the ideal nostalgic, who is merely a product of nostalgia themselves:

> Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an ‘enchanted world’ with clear borders and values. It could be a secular expression of spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, for a home that is both physical and spiritual, for the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history. (12)

Nostalgia is therefore a delight in the fantasy that is only possible under conditions in which an actual return remains unavailable, and not unavailable now, but unavailable-in-principle. Boym’s vision of this enchanted world with clear borders and values is articulated by the village, which is of-the-world, then embalmed and sealed by the water of the reservoir. The water marks what she calls the ‘clear border and value’ necessary for making what is lost enchanted, or inaccessible, unsullied and therefore perfect. In the reservoir noir of *On Beulah Height*, however, what has been enacted in the village of Dendale prior to being ‘drowned’ means even its ritual destruction cannot make it ‘enchanted’, and its loss expresses more than just nostalgia.

The ritualistic nature of Dendale’s destruction is bound up with a pervasive sense of sin, Jack Allgood’s of course, but even perhaps his daughter’s ‘sin’ of protecting him, which works to engender a narrative preoccupied with images of cleansing and renewal. Betsy’s childhood story, revealed subsequently to be a transcript of therapy paid for by the Wulfstans, lends a flavour of ‘original’ sin to child Betsy’s knowledge of her father’s paedophilia.[3] The transcripts also illustrate the historical research done by Hill:

> *Back in Dendale we heard they were finishing off the clearing-up job, shifting any big stuff left, sorting out the electrics and such, and when that were all done, they bulldozed the buildings. Seems it didn’t matter whether they were*

3 It is characteristic of the novel’s detective story form that the innocent are ultimately revealed as knowing.

> *going to be drowned or not, the Board didn’t want owt left standing to tempt folk to explore either under the water or out of it* (249, italics in original).

The ritual demolition of the process of constructing a reservoir is both a historically accurate and informed detail and a thread that connects all three texts. In ‘The Clean Slate’, the significance of this ‘double’ destruction is underlined through its repetition. The village of Derwent was ‘already flattened, already deserted’ when it was flooded, then later ‘they demolished the village before they flooded it’, the story reiterates (123, 129-130). However, *Haweswater*’s evocation of this haunting ritual most explicitly states what was feared by water companies: ‘A village underwater and perfect? There was something sinister about it, was there not?’ (215). In Hall’s novel, the Manchester City Waterwork’s collective concern that the village will attract morbid site-seers is articulated without speech marks and simply embedded in the writing. Yet this anxiety is also connected to the pattern of personification noted earlier that springs from the human fear of drowning in a flood. Both these characteristics — personification and ritual demolition — mark the representations of drowned villages in these texts. Mantel’s short story does acknowledge the irrational nature of this fear though by stating that the creation of a reservoir on the site of a village is more akin to the sinking of the Titanic than a compulsory eviction order. As suggested earlier, Mantel writes that the village was already flattened and deserted before it was flooded: ‘But when I was a child I didn’t know this. I understood that the people themselves had left before the flood, but I imagined them going about their daily work to the last possible moment’ (123). In short, Derwent for the narrator of ‘The Clean Slate’ was ‘a Pompeii, a *Marie Celeste*’ (127). It is as if the water board companies, both real and fictive, understood the imaginative power and narrative pull of the drowned village and tried to diffuse it with limited success

Similarly, there is emotional danger and charge attached to the return of Dendale in *On Beulah Height* and a parallel feeling of morbidity to its reappearance. The following statement is Wulfstan’s explanation of his whereabouts, or alibi, as well as his first veiled confession:

> “Morbid curiosity, Superintendent. This heat wave has gone on so long that what remains of Dendale village had begun to re-emerge […] I fantasize that when I reach the Neb, I’ll see everything as it was, I mean *everything* as it

> was. There. Now you see the depths of absurdity to which the rational mind can descend”. (Hill 297)

Wulfstan’s daughter Mary who was the final child to go missing before the reservoir was completed is caught within the ellipsis of its flood. She, like the other children taken, is unable to age or progress due to her abduction and, as is confirmed later, her rape and murder. Without a body, any resolution or explanation, the reservoir comes to represent the void of the parents’ loss, as well as the loss of sense. In this way, from the beginning, the girls are inscribed upon the landscape, upon the sealed, inaccessible, dead space of the water. Subsequently this metaphor is restated through their actual resting place within the sheepfold on the ridge of Beulah Height, quite literally they are buried within the landscape. This body as land, this physiognomy as geography, extends as well to other characters, and is similarly central to characterisation in *Haweswater*. Before the revelation of the complex extent to which Elizabeth Wulfstan has inscribed and transferred the girls’ bodies into the landscape and her own art, a minor character reads the physical return of Dendale into the face of Walter Wulfstan:

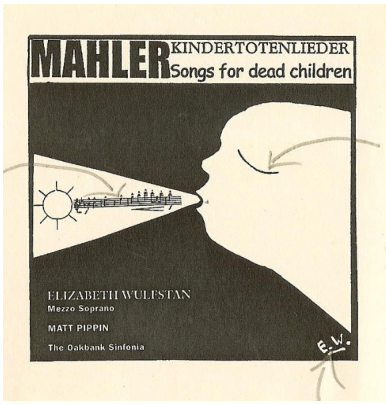
> For now, as his gaze moved from the lovely and beloved face of the wife to the ravaged face of the husband, he thought he saw there, as clearly as the returning outline of Dendale village under the searching eye of the sun, the lineaments of guilt and the acceptance of discovery (480).

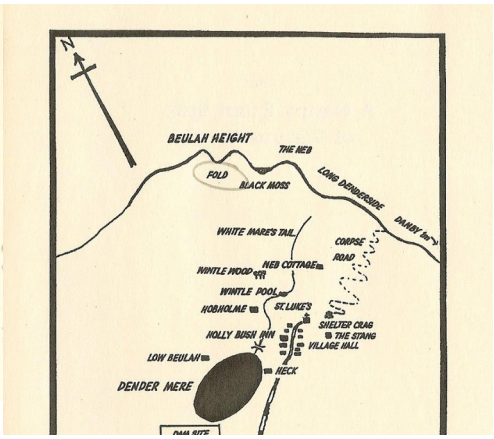
The character in question is Arne Krog, a musician present in the village when the first three girls went missing, and though never a suspect to the police he remains one throughout to the reader. It is significant what Arne reads into Wulfstan’s face, since Arne has worked out what happened to Lorraine and has shopped Wulfstan to the police. He is also having an affair with Wulfstan’s wife, Chloe. Wulfstan’s ‘ravaged’ physiognomy is inextricably linked to the geography of Dendale, regardless of the subjectivity of Arne’s reading. Dendale, or the reservoir, already represented the paralysing of Mary’s childhood, the stopped clock. However, it is also within the cellar of his house in Dendale that Wulfstan tortures and murders the innocent Benny Lightfoot. The place is therefore doubly inscribed with both grief and guilt, as well as being held in an unnatural kind of suspended animation or tension. When the drought begins to reveal the ‘secrets’ the underwater Dendale has kept, it brings a haunted anxiety and obsessiveness to Wulfstan all over again, which it is written on his face.

Returning briefly to Head’s statement regarding McEwan’s use of a liminal space as a site to symbolically embed specific ideas, Hill goes a step further by constructing a character who enacts such an inscription in their own work within the novel. Elizabeth Wulfstan, the transformed Betsy Allgood from the transcription opening the book, maps the landscape of Dendale onto a child’s face for the front cover of her CD (see figure one below). If the image is turned to the right forty-five degrees, the outline of Beulah Height emerges (see figure two) and from out of the child’s mouth, now the ‘fold’, the bars of Mahler’s Resurrection Symphony flow while at the same time pointing into the mouth, the burial site of the dead children. Pascoe realises that the choice of ‘Songs for dead children’ reveals Elizabeth’s desire for redemption through ‘telling’ someone where the girls’ bodies lie without betraying her father. He also notices the adapted lyrics describe finding the children in the sunshine on Beulah Height, inscribed into the sunshine on the CD cover. Mahler’s Resurrection Symphony is a separate piece of music, yet these are the only notes featured on the front of the CD, bursting out of the ‘mouth’ of the hidden resting place of the fold:

> And Pascoe like a conjurer held up the map and the CD, then turned the latter through forty-five degrees so that the silhouetted face became the outline of the Dendale fells with a formalized sun arrowing its rays down into what had been the girl’s mouth. (508)

The face is a child’s face, the stoppered mouth belongs to her and the landscape; it no longer exists and still exists, both at once. Ultimately, despite catalysing the story, which has already started when the reader arrives in it, the reservoir is spur rather than ‘key’ to the mystery. Geography is paramount, yet the novel takes its name from the Height, where Lorraine dies and where the other little girls are buried, and not from the village of Dendale or the reservoir that ‘preserves’ it. The reservoir does not cause the murders, it does not hide the evidence of them, though it does circuitously and elliptically, in both its drowning and its drought, lead to the revelation of the truth.





Left to Right: ‘Songs for dead children’ CD cover (figure one) (336) Map of Dendale (figure two) (2)

‘The Clean Slate’ is an enigmatic short story that traces an unnamed, female narrator’s attempts to glean information from her mother, Veronica, in order to write their family tree. They hail from a drowned village in Derbyshire, destroyed to create the Ladybower dam and Derwent reservoir. The story takes a reflective form, with the narrator considering how she thought the village was flooded as a child, while questioning her mother in a private hospital in the present. Veronica is both secretive and manipulative; the mother-daughter relationship is revealed as complex and difficult. Moreover, the familial traits emphasised are stupidity, failure and downright bad luck. Despite this unfortunate genealogy, the narrator reveals herself as a published author, well known enough to be acknowledged by readers: ‘I assume you’ve read my new novel, *The Clean Slate*’ (126). There is much factual information about the building of the reservoir included in the story, and towards the end the implication is that the narrator’s mother is terminally ill.

As stated in the introduction to this essay, ‘The Clean Slate’ is very different to the other two texts under scrutiny here, not merely in terms of its shorter form, but also its elliptical content. Like much of Mantel’s other work, the story relishes its own ambiguity and from the beginning troubles the notion of stable origins, as well as the cause and effect relationship:

> I began this enterprise because I wanted to find out something about my ancestors who lived in the drowned village, I thought it might provide a reason for my fear of water. (120)

Published in 2003, *Learning to Talk* is a collection of short stories that appeared the same year as Mantel’s memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost*, and, as seen here, the stories are

expressed in the same non-fictional, self-reflective style. There is both a self-consciousness and humour to the writing. For example, the suggestion that the ancestors actually ‘lived’ in the drowned village, in its drowned state, leading their descendent, now writing, to fear water. Thus, the rational sequence of cause and effect/common sense is subtly disrupted.

These ancestors are not the only instance of interruption or disruption in the story, which creates an implicit, though fruitful, link between Irish identity/displacement and the experience of the Derwent villagers:

> The people from the drowned village were on [Veronica’s] father’s side of the family, and were English. Veronica was interested in matriarchies, in Irish matriarchies, and in reliving great moments in the life of matriarchies by repeating the same old stories: the jokes that have lost their punchlines, the retorts and witty snubs that have come unfastened from their origins. (Mantel 121)

This exaggeration, repetition and unfastening is what the story uses the reservoir as a space to try to describe through its simultaneous uncertainty and promise. The introduction of Veronica’s woolly fetishising of the past links back to the narrator’s childhood confusion about the ‘arrival’ of the reservoir, as commented upon earlier:

> I understood that the people themselves had left before the flood, but I imagined them going about their daily work till the last possible moment: listening out for a warning, something like an air-raid siren, and then immediately dropping whatever it was they were doing (123).

The narrator imagines scenes of desertion, reminiscent of twentieth-century mass migration, as well as war, atrocity and terror: ‘I saw them shrugging into their stout woollen coats […] I saw them laying down their knitting in mid-stitch’ (123). These individual interruptions and disruptions culminate with an on-the-page lacunae when a reader ‘fold[s] away the morning paper with a phrase, an ellipsis that would last their lifetimes’ (124). The *Marie Celeste*, the Deserted Village, is left in the child’s imagination exactly as it was lived in ready for ‘the private items of Derbyshire persons’ (128) to be found and washed about by the water.

The reservoir alongside the notion of unfastened origins, ‘slippages in time or sense, breaches between cause and effect’ (129), helps create a catalyst for the narrative with

similar fascination and power to that of *On Beulah Height*, albeit shorter and more ambiguous in execution. The narrator’s family history remains oblique, she herself accusing it both of ‘portent-overload’ (126), for example, hailing from a non-place that exists but is uninhabitable, as well as theorising that the family ‘was bent on erasing itself’ (126). All this unfastening and exaggeration yields a burgeoning weight of mythologies forming around a specific pastness and the power that accompanies such myth:

> By June 1945, only a pair of stone gateposts and the spire of the church could be seen. When I was a child, people would tell me AS A FACT that in hot summers, the church spire would rise above the waters, eerie and desolate under the burning sun. (Mantel 131)

As with Hall’s *Haweswater*, the Ladybower dam and Derwent reservoir are real locations and ‘The Clean Slate’, despite the oscillation between fact and ambivalence, contains much historical evidence and research. During the demolition of the buildings of Derwent, the church spire was originally left in place, perhaps due to suspicion about the ‘portent’ of destroying a ‘House of God’. This sentiment is definitely expressed fictionally in *Haweswater*. Private William Garry does not want to keep wiring up the church of Mardale, which like the other buildings remains wilfully resistant to the army’s new explosives: ‘[I]t didn’t feel right, sir, wiring-up a church again that wouldn’t drop. Perhaps He Himself didn’t like it’ (Hall 223-4). Yet Derwent’s spire was dynamited two years after the reservoir was filled in 1947 because it was considered structurally unsafe (Hallam). The fascination Mantel’s story records is also accurate, the capitalised ‘AS A FACT’ is both a humorous and honest reflection of the desire of folkloric imagination that there be a ‘perfect’ village beneath the water. This proliferation forces consideration of what is so heavily and deeply invested in this image or ruin. As Robert Ginsberg argues in *The Aesthetics of Ruins*: ‘The ruin is a choice. It has been preserved as a remnant of something valuable in the past. The symbolic ruin is testimony of a community’s identity’ (Ginsberg 107). It is an identity that lives on, it can return and has the power to reach out from the past and touch lives in the present. Mantel recently revisited the ‘drowning’ of Derwent that inspired this story in her second BBC Reith Lecture entitled ‘The Iron Maiden’. She explains that no one told her that the villagers had no warning when the water began pouring in, she just imagined it, illustrating the power of the name ‘drowned village’. Mantel then explains that, on the other hand, she *was* told of the steeple

resurfacing from the reservoir in dry weather: ‘This was not a fact, it was something else, it was a myth’. She explains that people were seeing the steeple ten years after it was gone and that ‘a myth is not a falsehood, it is a truth cast into symbol and metaphor, materially Derwent was gone, spiritually, it still existed’. Ginsberg argues that a ruin is a ‘choice’, but it seems more complex, as illustrated by the drowned village, it is more a need and a reflex.

Haweswater is a pastoral novel set in a Westmoreland valley between the two world wars. It ostensibly concerns the building of the Haweswater dam, based upon historical events although the timeframe has been moved forward. However, it is also the story of the love affair between the Manchester Waterworks representative, Jack Liggett and the ‘elemental’ (Knight) daughter of the land, Janet Lightburn. The novel begins with Janet’s birth, and knowledge of the village of Mardale is gained through her family’s farming of the land and her growing up there. When Jack arrives in the valley to announce it will be ‘drowned’ he is perceived to be of the city through and through. For example, shortly after installing himself in the local public house, the Dun Bull, he asks a poacher to bring him a dead golden eagle to be stuffed. He wants to own this beautiful, rare bird as an object of value that can be displayed and admired by those he works with in Manchester as a sign of his success and wealth.

Janet is openly hostile to Jack, but such extreme hatred trips over into passion when the two are caught under a tree in a rainstorm. The valley changes Jack and by the time the poacher returns with his prey, Jack is horrified by his request. He is so desperate to make amends that he tries to return the dead eagle to its crag top nest and dies making the attempt. Janet, who is left both unmarried and pregnant, loses her mind with the grief. After leaving Mardale, she gives birth and makes a partial recovery. She then returns to the village to watch the buildings being demolished by the army, and to steal some explosives. Subsequently, she tries to blow up the dam. The explosion causes only superficial damage to the outer wall, Janet’s body, on the other hand, is decimated. The novel ends with Janet’s brother, Isaac, who has grown up and become a professional diver, taking a job investigating Haweswater and deliberately drowning himself in the long finished reservoir.

Similarly to *On Beulah Height*, but more explicitly and consistently, *Haweswater* creates a relationship between the geography and the physiognomy of its people. As Stephen Knight commented in his review of the novel for the *TLS*: ‘[Janet] is, like the other villagers, at one with her environment’. Men in the novel are frequently described as quiet and stone-like, and Janet’s father Samuel has hair like straw and considers his daughter to have an animals of the Savannah look about her. There is a touch of cliché to these descriptions, avoided in the wry tone of Hill’s novel, yet they are such a consistent touchstone for every character that the initially negative effect in *Haweswater* gives way to a surprisingly rich, cumulative sense of authenticity. Despite the apparently ‘tightly woven bonds’ of Mardale though, Nancy’s argument concerning the lost community paradigm remains pertinent here. In fact, it is the *coming* of the reservoir, or the moment of its announcement, that forces this group of people to become engaged in the process of community. It is the shared loss, the shared void that is, perhaps only momentarily, unifying rather than the apparently solid place of Mardale itself. Nancy writes of his view of the counter-intuitive relationship between community and society:

> [T]he thought of community or the desire for it might well be nothing other than a belated invention a belated invention that tried to respond to the harsh reality of the modern experience […] So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us* – question, waiting, event, imperative *in the wake of* society. (10-11)

He explains that the limit or edge of what constitutes community, or indeed the outward edge formed *by* community, traces an entirely different line to the one we might expect. This analysis offers a fruitful way to read Isaac’s naïve and joyful mistaking of the planned perimeter of the edge of Haweswater as the landing strip for Father Christmas: ‘And how could he guess that these are the markers of the new waterline, the estimated shore of the full reservoir?’ (Hall 194). In light of Nancy’s argument, these ‘markers’ offer a line or moment of definition for this small, yet emerging, community of displaced people. This reading implies that the *people* are the community and, as with the Dendale/reservoir *frisson*, it is the space between the place of Mardale and the non-place of Haweswater where the community is precariously and temporarily situated in Hall’s novel.

Linking back to the ritual of demolition described in *On Beulah Height*, another historical aspect of the physical and emotional cleansing process of the preparation for a reservoir are the exhumations described in *Haweswater*:

> The following spring, the bodies were exhumed […] The cemetery would be combed clean, and the rank, coppery odour of old blood and wood mixing would find its way into the air, as coffins were lifted from the red-black earth […] It is not often that a family must bury its dead twice. (187)

There is the justification of hygiene for this ritualised action. Yet it also reveals a desire to eradicate, to erase, as the narrator of ‘The Clean Slate’ says, and to make way for the future. Both the resurrection and the double burial lend an uncanny twist to the ceremony, as does the detail that this action parallels how Mardale initially processed death as a rite before the village had its own church.[4] Moreover, there is futility to this desire to clean the slate, as the narrator of *Haweswater* also explains that the true ancestors of the place will always remain within the reservoir as the ‘decomposed flesh of the oldest corpses [will] always remain part of the land, supplying it with nutrients’, and potentially remaining behind in a more malign and infectious way as well.

The decomposed ancestors are not the only image of the remainder in *Haweswater*. The most emotive is Jack’s present to Janet the Christmas before his death:

> Inside the box, a tiny, crafted village rests against a green valley and is held inside a half-bubble, in a womb of clear liquid. There is a tiny church with a weather vane and a blue river snakes down from the moulded hills. She shakes the glass. Flurries of snow swirl and descend slowly over the village. (197)

It is the miniature representative of the village ‘underwater and perfect’ mentioned earlier, although the articulation of this fear by the water board comes later in the novel after Jack’s death. The snow storm offers the perfect double to the collectively imagined status and stasis of the ‘drowned village’ across all three texts. It also works to fetishise the idea as an object, a toy, dead in its perfection yet oddly reminiscent of a foetus in ‘a womb of clear liquid’. This artificial instance of preservation, like the

4 The church in Mardale was only granted burial rights in 1729, prior to that the Old Corpse Road ‘had been used for centuries by the rural community of the area for passage of their dead to a final resting place’ (186).

feared preservation of the village ‘underwater and perfect’, is also uncanny because it expresses the familiar returning in an unfamiliar form.

There are key threads and connections between these various representations that suggest a method or meaning to the way drowned villages are surfacing in contemporary British fiction. The expression of the return of the repressed marks all three texts, for example, as does the process of ritual exhumation and demolition. Pervasive nostalgia is also entwined with a desperate, often misguided and generally thwarted, search for origins, as well as the physiognomy of people becoming or being at one with the landscape, especially in *Haweswater* and *On Beulah Height*. Overall, it is the privileging of inscription, shared mythology-making and presentiment that unites the texts, which is at least partly achieved through intertextuality. Key touchstones include, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the music of Mahler, *The Waste Land*, D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* and the King James Bible. As suggested through the work of Head on McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*, these representations of drowned villages offer places of inscription. The drowned village is a space, or *khõra*, for experimentation and expression, upon which to inscribe irresolvable questions of grief, loss, melancholy and nostalgia. Ultimately, informed by Derrida, this process of inscription opens up a spatial/temporal moment that receives all such properties while in itself possessing none of them.

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